CLAIMS:

1. A method of processing a compressed media signal, in which samples of said media signal are represented by variable-length code words (VLCs); the method comprising the steps of:

- decoding the VLCs of a sample;
- modifying a plurality of said decoded VLCs in accordance with a given signal processing algorithm;
- encoding the modified decoded VLCs into modified VLCs by a first coding method;
- encoding the modified decoded VLCs into at least one length of code by a second coding method;
- for each of the plurality of modified VLCs, selecting the modified VLC coded by the first or second method that has a length closest to the length of the corresponding unmodified VLC; and
- combining the selected modified VLCs and any unmodified VLCs.

2. A method as claimed in claim 1, in which the first coding method is a standard VLC coding method.

3. A method as claimed in either claim 1 or claim 2, in which the second coding method is an Escape-coding method.

4. A method as claimed in any preceding claim, in which the modified encoded VLCs are encoded into a plurality of lengths using the second coding method.

5. A method as claimed in claim 4, in which the second coding method provides codes of between approximately 7 to 21 bits longer than the first coding method.

6. A method as claimed in any preceding claim, in which the signal processing algorithm is a watermark algorithm.

7. A method as claimed in claim 6, in which the decoded VLCs are only modified under certain criteria, said criteria concerning the visibility of an applied watermark.

8. The method as claimed in any preceding claim, which involves inserting bits into the encoded modified VLCs.

9. The method as claimed in any preceding claim, which involves the treatment of packets of VLCs individually, without reference to other packets.

10. A signal processing device for a compressed media signal comprises:

- a decoder operable to decode samples of a compressed media signal represented by variable-length code words (VLCs);
- means for modifying a plurality of the decoded VLCs in accordance with a given signal processing algorithm;
- a first encoder operable to encode the modified decoded VLCs into modified VLCs by a first coding method;
- a second encoder operable to encode the modified decoded VLCs into modified VLCs by a second coding method;
- memory means operable to buffer the modified decoded VLCs from the fist and second encoders; and
- a controller operable to select the modified VLC from either the first or second encoder closest in length to an unmodified VLC, for each of the plurality of modified VLCs.